

# Ocean farmers take WA barra to the world

■ Brad Thompson



Perth-based Marine Produce Australia is aiming to double production capacity of barramundi at its Cone Bay farms to 15,000 tonnes a year as the company considers a re-listing on the Australian Securities Exchange.

The expansion plans — which follow a \$2.4 million profit last financial year — will allow MPA to export its Cone Bay Ocean Barramundi for the first time.

MPA has spent a decade and invested more than \$100 million pioneering the farming of barramundi in sea cages in the waters of Cone Bay in the Kimberley's Buccaneer Archipelago.

The unlisted public company raised \$4.8 million late last year to support its near-term expansion plans, which include investment in new infrastructure such as sea cages and boats to increase year-round production to more than 100 tonnes a week.

MPA's long-term strategy is to reach 15,000t, its benchmark level for becoming internationally competitive.

MPA is the only producer operating in the 2000ha (20,000 tonne per annum) Kimberley Aquaculture Development Zone, which was created by the WA Government in 2014.

The company has a lease covering 700ha in the KADZ, where it has more than one million fish growing in 23 cages.

MPA has applied for a further 800ha in the zone to give the company the capacity to expand from 6990 tonnes a year.

The only other bid for new leases available in the KADZ is backed by Maxima, a private company founded by the late Graeme Hutton and now run by his son John Hutton.

Maxima's Aarli Mayi Aquaculture project is supported by three groups of traditional owners corporations — the Dambimangari, the Bardi Jawi Nimiidiman and the Mayala.

The Hutton family helped found MPA and retain a 24 per cent share in the company. They also participated in the recent capital raising.

Mr Hutton said he had worked with some of the Aboriginal families involved in the Aarli Mayi bid on his family's pearling leases as a teenager and hoped they succeeded in their bid to create jobs and income.

His family will control 25 per cent of the Aarli Mayi operating company through Maxima.

Mr Hutton said there was strong interest from investors overseas and on the east coast in providing the capital to meet high start-up costs. Up to 20 different species of finfish are being considered for the project, including barramundi.

MPA managing director Desiree Allen said expanding its footprint in the KADZ was critical to MPA's growth plans.



Not so fin: MPA dive team leader Matthew Webb shows off a Cone Bay barramundi.



Holding pattern: The cages used to hold the barramundi as they grow to harvest size.



"MPA has also spent the past 10 years developing its Cone Bay brand, which is now one of the most well recognised seafood brands on Australian restaurant menus," Dr Allen said.

"We cannot grow to an internationally competitive level unless we have security of tenure over a significant lease area and can provide investors with the confidence that their money can be used directly to expand to a level that provides

options of off-take agreements, significant export tonnage and realised economies of scale."

MPA's prospectus for its capital raising forecast after-tax profit of more than \$5 million in 2015-16. It spent about three years on the ASX before being delisted in 2010.

Chairman Miles Kennedy said the MPA would consider relisting in 2017-18 "with three years of profit under the belt" if it met its financial forecasts.



MPA has spent 10 years developing its Cone Bay brand.

Desiree Allen

## Palmer nickel staff laid off

■ Brisbane

More than 200 workers at Clive Palmer's Queensland nickel refinery have been laid off amid sliding nickel prices.

Queensland Nickel says it has been forced to make 237 workers redundant, partly because of the State Government's lack of support during a tough trading period. The price of nickel has tumbled by 42 per cent in the past year due to a global oversupply of the commodity.

The job losses at the Townsville refinery would hurt families and the region's economy, Queensland Acting Premier Jackie Trad said.

"Job losses of this magnitude will be felt throughout the local regional economy," she said. "But the Government did try to work with Queensland Nickel to secure these jobs."

She said the company refused the Government's request to access its financial statements. "We could not hand over money to a private company without full financial due diligence," she said.

Queensland Nickel managing director Clive Mensink said the Government supported other multinationals. "We requested a \$30 million guarantee to support our borrowings," he said.

AAP

## ANZ to defend law suits

ANZ will defend multimillion-dollar legal actions by two sacked employees who allege the bank condoned a culture of sex, drugs and alcohol among senior traders.

Two traders, Etienne Alexiou and Patrick O'Connor, were sacked last year by ANZ Banking Group for "serious breaches of ANZ's code of conduct, policies and values". In separate claims, Mr Alexiou is seeking \$30 million and Mr O'Connor is claiming \$5 million for damages, lost bonuses and lost income following their dismissal.

The claims include allegations of drug use on the bank's dealing room floor and a toxic culture within the senior ranks of the global market division which was allegedly at odds with bank's code of conduct.

ANZ chief risk officer Nigel Williams said Mr O'Connor's dismissal related to abuse of a company-issued credit card and both Mr O'Connor's and Mr Alexiou's dismissals related to highly inappropriate and offensive electronic communication.

"ANZ will be vigorously defending both their court applications," he said. Mr Williams said the bank was investigating allegations made by the men in relation to other staff.

AAP